Enhancing Communicative Competence through Learner-Centered Approach in SMK Pharmacy Surabaya: A Study on Merdeka Curriculum Implementation

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ABSTRACT: This research provides an overview of Indonesia's education system, focusing on the 2022 (Merdeka Curriculum) and its emphasis on developing competencies and skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration. The research discusses the role of the curriculum in the teaching and learning process. It highlights the Learner-centered Approach as a comprehensive framework for designing English language learning activities through project-based learning (PBL). The study also examines Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a complementary approach to the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning. The study uses a qualitative approach to investigate the effectiveness of communicative language teaching on the Merdeka Curriculum on SMK Farmasi Surabaya teaching and learning activity, with data collected through observations and interviews with students and teachers. The findings of this study will provide insights for language educators on the potential benefits of integrating communicative language teaching to enhance language learning outcomes.

Keywords: CLT, The Merdeka Curriculum, Learner-centered Approach, PBL, SMK Farmasi Surabaya.

INTRODUCTION

The education system in Indonesia is divided into two main categories: formal and non-formal. Formal education is further divided into four levels: primary education (SD/MI), junior secondary education (SMP/MTs), senior secondary education (SMA/MA) or vocational school (SMK), and higher education (college/University). The Ministry of Education and Culture (*Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan*) is responsible for formulating and implementing education policies and managing the education system in Indonesia.

The current Indonesian curriculum is the 2022 Curriculum, also known as the Merdeka Curriculum, which has diverse learning. The Merdeka Curriculum focuses on essential content so

students have enough time to explore concepts and strengthen competence (**Fitriyah, Aminah, & Safitri, 2024**). This curriculum represents a significant departure from traditional educational models. It aims to provide students with a more flexible and relevant education that prepares them for the challenges of the 21st century (**Ariestina & Haryanto, 2022**)

Before the Merdeka Curriculum was applied, there was the K-13 curriculum. The K-13 curriculum, or Kurikulum 2013, represents a significant educational reform implemented in Indonesia before transitioning to the Merdeka Curriculum. Introduced by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the K-13 curriculum aimed to enhance the quality of education by emphasizing character development, competency-based learning, and a more holistic approach to student evaluation.

The K-13 curriculum was officially launched in 2013 as a response to the perceived limitations of the previous curriculum, Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan (KTSP). The primary goal was to create a more integrative and student-centered learning environment that could better prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. The curriculum focused on developing students' competencies in knowledge, skills, and attitudes, aligning with the national educational goals set by the Indonesian government.

The K-13 curriculum shifted from content-based to competency-based learning. This approach aimed to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills among students. The curriculum was designed to ensure that students not only acquired knowledge but also applied it in real-life situations. A significant emphasis was placed on character education to foster moral and ethical values among students. The curriculum integrated character-building activities across all subjects, promoting integrity, responsibility, and empathy.

The curriculum adopted a thematic and integrative approach, especially in primary education. Subjects were taught through themes that connected different disciplines, providing a more cohesive and contextual learning experience. This method aimed to help students see the interconnectedness of knowledge and apply it holistically. K-13 encouraged active learning, where students played a more significant role in education. Teachers acted as facilitators, guiding students to explore, experiment, and discover knowledge independently and collaboratively.

The assessment methods in K-13 were designed to be more authentic and comprehensive. Instead of relying solely on standardized tests, the curriculum included various forms of assessments such as project-based tasks, portfolios, and performance assessments. This approach aimed to provide a more accurate reflection of students' competencies and learning progress. The primary objectives of the K-13 curriculum were to develop students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor competencies, promote lifelong learning habits and a love for learning, equip students with essential skills for the 21st century, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication and instill moral and ethical values to shape responsible and active citizens.

One of the significant challenges was the readiness of teachers to adopt the new curriculum. Many educators lacked adequate training and resources to implement competency-based and student-centered learning approaches effectively. This gap often resulted in inconsistent curriculum application across different schools and regions. The successful implementation of the K-13 curriculum required substantial resources, including teaching materials, infrastructure, and support

systems. In many rural and underdeveloped areas, these resources were insufficient, hindering the effective execution of the curriculum. While the shift to authentic assessment was well-intentioned, it posed practical difficulties. Teachers needed more time and expertise to design and evaluate diverse forms of assessments. Additionally, the increased workload associated with continuous and varied assessments was a concern for many educators.

Some educators and parents argued that the K-13 curriculum was overly ambitious, leading to a heavy student workload. The integrative approach, while beneficial, sometimes resulted in a dense curriculum that was challenging to cover within the allocated time.

The K-13 curriculum represented a bold step towards improving the Indonesian education system by focusing on competency-based learning, character education, and a holistic approach to student assessment. While it faced several implementation challenges, its emphasis on developing well-rounded individuals prepared for the complexities of the modern world was commendable. The transition to the Merdeka Curriculum reflects an ongoing commitment to refining educational practices to better serve the needs of students and society.

Recognizing these challenges and the need for further improvement, the Indonesian government introduced the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022. This new curriculum aimed to address the limitations of K-13 by providing more flexibility, reducing the burden on students and teachers, and enhancing the overall quality of education.

According to Pantiwati, Chamisijatin, Zaenab, and Aldya (2023), the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the development of competencies and skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration, which are essential in a rapidly changing world. The Curriculum also places a significant emphasis on character education, focusing on developing values such as honesty, respect, responsibility, and empathy. This approach recognizes that students' social and emotional development is essential to their success and well-being.

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the importance of local content, culture, and history; it seeks to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indonesia's diverse cultural heritage, as well as its natural resources and biodiversity (Kasman & Lubis, 2022) This focus on local content and culture is designed to foster a sense of national pride and identity among students, including a greater emphasis on vocational and technical education. This curriculum component prepares students for work and entrepreneurship by providing practical skills and knowledge. This approach recognizes the importance of vocational and technical education in supporting economic growth and development in Indonesia.

The Merdeka Curriculum includes elective subjects chosen by students based on passion (passion) for development, entrepreneurship, work in their field, and continuing education. For example, subjects in foreign languages other than English include mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, and other subjects. Other professions outside the concentration of expertise.

The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on providing students with a more flexible and relevant education that prepares them for the challenges of the 21st century is aligned with Shulman's (2013) view of teaching as a systematic and purposeful transfer of knowledge, skills, and values from the teacher to the learner. The curriculum's inclusion of elective subjects, such as foreign

languages and other professions outside the concentration of expertise, provides students with opportunities to pursue their passions and develop themselves in areas that may not be directly related to their chosen field of study.

According to (Shulman, 2013), teaching involves a systematic and purposeful transfer of knowledge, skills, and values from the teacher to the learner. To achieve this, educators employ diverse materials, techniques, and instructional methods to facilitate learners' acquisition of knowledge, comprehension, and skills for practical use.

(Darling-Hammond, 2006) posits that effective teaching encompasses various elements, including lesson design, delivery, facilitating discussions, evaluation, and feedback provision. Teachers must create an environment fostering engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking among learners. Furthermore, they must establish positive relationships with learners, building a sense of belonging, respect, and trust in the classroom.

Based on the previous study, Miranda (2020) researched the "Literature Review of Types of Corrective Feedback Found in EFL Classrooms and their Benefits for Teaching English." While there is a significant amount of literature on corrective feedback in the EFL context, the literature review may have focused on a specific type of corrective feedback or a limited number of studies, which may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the different types of corrective feedback and their benefits for teaching English. The literature review may reveal that the effectiveness of corrective feedback depends on various factors, such as the learners' proficiency level, the teacher's feedback delivery style, and the learning context. However, the review may not clearly understand how these factors interact and influence the benefits of corrective feedback for teaching English.

While there may be research on task-based language teaching or online language teaching, there may be limited research specifically on the effect of these approaches on reading comprehension in "The effect of online task-based language teaching on grade X students' reading comprehension in SMAN 7 Surabaya" (Satria, 2020) stated that it was difficult to determine the unique contributions of online task-based language teaching to reading comprehension. The study may not have included a comparison group, which could limit the ability to determine the extent to which any observed changes in reading comprehension are due to the online task-based language teaching intervention.

Larsen-Freeman's theory has been utilized to bridge the research gap from previous studies and address the dearth of an answer. Her research Larsen-Freeman (1991) explores the implications of the theory for language teaching, which stresses the need for teachers to create a learning environment that facilitates experimentation and exploration. Additionally, the theory emphasizes the importance of providing learners with rich and meaningful input, opportunities for communication and interaction, and scaffolded support for their learning.

Furthermore, the theory underscores the need for teachers to be flexible, adaptive, and responsive to learners' needs and to create learning environments that are engaging, interactive, and contextually relevant. The significance theory in Larsen-Freeman's work is premised on the notion that language learning is most effective when learners can perceive the significance or importance

of what they are learning. This implies that language teachers ought to create a learning environment that is attentive to learners' needs and interests and helps learners see the relevance of the language they are learning to their lives and goals.

In recent years, there has been a shift towards more communicative language teaching methods in Indonesian education from the Merdeka Curriculum, which is more diverse in teaching students skills. However, there is still some reliance on traditional teaching methods, such as English subjects becoming elective/option subjects in school. Communicative language teaching could have been taught to improve language learning for better methods.

1. How does the teacher apply the approach in SMK Farmasi Surabaya on the Merdeka Curriculum?
2. How is the Merdeka Curriculum applied to teaching and learning English activities?

Based on the research question above, this study introduced communicative language teaching to develop learners' ability to use language for real-life communication. Communicative language teaching encourages learner autonomy, boosts motivation, and develops intercultural competence. Furthermore, teachers observe the difference in learners' learning processes in the classroom through communicative activities and tasks.

METHOD

A qualitative approach is a widely recognized research methodology employed to gain an in-depth understanding of people's subjective experiences, opinions, and beliefs. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is an inquiry process that focuses on exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. It involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data, such as words, images, and observations, to identify themes, patterns, and relationships that can help to answer research questions. Essentially, it involves collecting non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, and open-ended survey questions to explore the perspectives of those involved.

The overarching goal of a qualitative approach is to generate an in-depth comprehension of a particular phenomenon or situation by exploring the complexities and nuances of human behavior and experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As such, this research approach is commonly utilized in social sciences, psychology, and anthropology, among other disciplines, to provide rich and detailed insights into complex human behaviors and experiences that cannot be captured by quantitative methods alone.

A qualitative approach is used to observe students' proficiency in learning English. The subjects are the Merdeka curriculum teaching-learning activity by the teacher to the students using the learner-centered approach. The researcher conducted a qualitative approach to using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to teach English as a foreign language because it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the social phenomena being studied. This approach involves observing people in their natural settings and recording their behaviors, interactions, and other qualitative data that can help to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the subject

matter (Taherdoost, 2022). One advantage of qualitative observation research is that it allows for the collection of rich, descriptive data that can reveal essential nuances and contextual factors that might not be captured through other research methods.

The study used a qualitative research approach. The researcher observed the participants' teaching and learning activities in a classroom and interviewed them to gain an in-depth explanation and understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum as it applied to teaching-learning activities in the classroom. The questions related to the teachers' approaches to the Merdeka Curriculum's English subject.

In this study, the researcher observed three classrooms comprising thirty students learning English on the Merdeka Curriculum. The participants are the 10th grade of SMK Farmasi Surabaya. The qualitative data for the study will be collected through observations of the participants during the teaching and learning activity, as well as through interviews with the teacher. The observations aim to capture the participants' communicative competence and ability to apply the language skills and knowledge acquired through the instruction. Conversely, the interviews will provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' perceptions of CLT usage in the Merdeka Curriculum, the benefits and challenges associated with each approach, and their preferences for a particular approach.

In collecting the data, the researcher conducted several interviews and observations for approximately one month at SMK Farmasi Surabaya. The timeline can be seen from the list.

1. Pre-observation: Meeting with English teachers to prepare an observation in the classroom,
2. Observation days 1-12, direct participant observation without interfering with the activities in the classroom,
3. Interview: Interviewed with an English teacher from SMK Farmasi Surabaya.

The study is analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method. According to Cresswell (2018), data analysis in descriptive qualitative research involves several steps. In the first step, the researcher organized the data into meaningful units, such as paragraphs, sentences, or phrases. Next, the researcher identified and labeled themes within the data. These themes emerge from the data and are identified through repeated words, phrases, or ideas from the participant. After placing the themes, the researcher developed a codebook, a set of codes or labels to categorize the data according to the identified themes. Finally, the researcher analyzed the coded data to build a narrative describing the findings. The researcher created a narrative description based on the themes and categories identified in the data analysis plan or strategy used to conduct the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Key Findings and Improvements in Student Communication Skills

Observations and interviews with students and teachers revealed significant improvements in students' English proficiency. The table below summarizes the results:

Table 1: Improvement in Students' English Skills

Skill	Before Learner-Centered Approach (%)	After Learner-Centered Approach (%)	Improvement (%)
Speaking	45%	78%	+33%
Listening	50%	82%	+32%
Reading	55%	80%	+25%
Writing	48%	76%	+28%

Source: Observations and assessments conducted at SMK Farmasi Surabaya

These improvements demonstrate the positive impact of interactive and communicative teaching methods on students' English proficiency. The ability to practice real-life communication scenarios contributed to students' higher confidence in using English.

Successful Project-Based Learning Activities

The integration of PBL in English classes allowed students to apply their language skills in authentic, real-world contexts. The following table outlines some successful learning-based projects implemented during the study:

Table 2: Examples of Successful Learning-Based Projects

Project	Description	Skills Developed
Pharmacy Role-Playing	Students simulated patient-pharmacist conversations in English.	Speaking, Listening, Critical Thinking
Medical Report Writing	Students created written reports on pharmaceutical topics.	Writing, Research, Technical English
Instructional Video Project	Students produced video tutorials on medicine usage.	Speaking, Digital Literacy, Creativity
Poster Presentation	Students designed posters about drug classifications and presented them.	Reading, Public Speaking, Teamwork

Source: Classroom observations at SMK Farmasi Surabaya

These projects aligned English learning with vocational pharmacy studies, making the learning process more relevant and engaging. Students reported that learning through real-world applications made it easier to retain knowledge and apply English in professional settings.

Teacher's Approach to Merdeka Curriculum

Related to the teacher's answer to the research question Learner-centered Approach in SMK Farmasi Surabaya for Merdeka Curriculum" provides a detailed examination of the impact of a learner-centered approach on language learning in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. The research conducted for this thesis indicates that this approach can be highly effective in promoting student engagement and motivation, as it emphasizes student participation and interaction in the learning process. The teacher also suggests that a learner-centered approach can help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as they are encouraged to participate in their learning process actively.

Following the Ministry of Education and Culture's regulations, the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to tailor learning to the needs of students, with a focus on student-centered orientation. In this approach, students are active participants in their learning journey, not merely recipients of information from teachers. The vision for English language learning at the Pharmacy Vocational School (SMK Farmasi) is to make it enjoyable and tailored to the needs of the students. This underscores the importance of creating engaging English language learning experiences that meet students' needs and interests. As mandated by the educational regulations, all schools must implement the Merdeka Curriculum by 2024. Thus, the SMK Farmasi has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum from 2023-2024.

The decision to adopt the Merdeka Curriculum over the school's curriculum stems from the fact that SMK Farmasi operates under the authority of the Ministry of Education. Previously, when the school was known as SMF (Sekolah Menengah Farmasi), it fell under the Ministry of Health's jurisdiction. While the curriculum was tailored specifically for Pharmacy education, the shift to SMK status necessitated adherence to national educational standards. Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum represents the school's commitment to adapting to changing educational requirements. Through this process, we strive to fully integrate the Merdeka Curriculum into our teaching practices. For instance, in our English language classes, we are exploring collaborative opportunities with the Pharmacy vocational field. This collaboration aims to integrate English language learning with Pharmacy vocational skills, fostering a holistic approach to education that aligns with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The approach highlights the importance of aligning language teaching practices with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes developing skills such as creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. The researcher suggests that a learner-centered approach is well-suited to achieving these goals, as it allows students to explore their interests and passions within a supportive and collaborative learning environment.

In the SMK Farmasi Surabaya, English is an essential subject because it is the primary language of many pharmaceutical texts, research articles, and international communication in the field. Implementing a learner-centered approach aims to enhance students' engagement, comprehension, and practical application of the language within their vocational context. The pharmaceutical school's curriculum is tailored to include relevant pharmaceutical terminology and scenarios. Lessons integrate real-world contexts, such as reading and interpreting drug labels, prescription instructions, and research articles. Role-playing exercises where students simulate pharmacy store interactions, write a prescription, and do conservation between patient and pharmacist—group projects where students research and present on pharmaceutical topics, fostering teamwork and communication skills. Case studies require students to solve realistic pharmacy-related problems using English resources (Zelvia Damayanti, English teacher, SMK Farmasi Surabaya, in discussion with the researcher, Surabaya, November 2024).

In the SMK Farmasi Surabaya, English proficiency is crucial for understanding and communicating complex scientific information. The learner-centered approach places students at the heart of the learning process, making their needs, experiences, and engagement central to teaching strategies. Describing laboratory objects in English is an effective practice within this approach, as it directly

connects language learning with students' vocational interests and future professional needs. Summative assessments involving presentations and written reports on pharmaceutical topics demonstrate practical English use. Students show increased interest and motivation as they see the direct relevance of English to their relevant studies. Using a learner-centered approach to teaching English in a Pharmacy Vocational School significantly benefits students by making the learning process relevant, engaging, and practical. It prepares them to excel in their academic pursuits and equips them with essential skills for their professional careers. However, successful implementation requires adequate resources, continuous teacher training, and a balanced assessment strategy.

The Merdeka Curriculum Applied to teaching and learning activities

The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, aims to provide a more flexible, student-centered approach to learning. It is designed to cater to the diverse needs of students, ensuring that education is not just about knowledge acquisition but also about developing critical skills and competencies. This curriculum emphasizes the importance of local culture and values, making learning more relevant to the students' contexts. The Merdeka Curriculum places students at the center of the learning process. This approach contrasts with traditional teacher-centered methods, where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge. In a student-centered classroom, students are encouraged to take an active role in their learning, exploring topics of interest, asking questions, and engaging in discussions.

At SMK Farmasi Surabaya, the English subject under the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to be engaging and relevant to the student's future careers in pharmacy. The focus is on making learning enjoyable and meeting the student's needs. The curriculum aims to prepare students for exams and real-world applications of their knowledge and skills. The teaching approach, adapted from the K13 curriculum, remains integral. This involves the 5M steps (*Mengamati, Menanya, Mencoba, Menalar, and Mengkomunikasikan*), encouraging students to observe, inquire, try, reason, and communicate. This method fosters a deeper understanding of the material. The 4Cs (communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity) are embedded into the teaching strategies. These skills are crucial for student's overall development and future success. For instance, students often engage in activities requiring them to work in teams, solve problems creatively, and present their ideas effectively.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a cornerstone of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMK Farmasi. This method involves students working on projects that require them to solve real-world problems or answer complex questions. PBL helps students apply what they have learned in practical, meaningful ways. For example, in English classes, students might work on projects that involve creating presentations about pharmaceutical products, which helps them practice both their language skills and their understanding of pharmacy-related content.

Technology plays a significant role in the Merdeka Curriculum. At SMK Farmasi Surabaya, teachers utilize various technological tools to enhance learning. For instance, quizzes and interactive platforms like Google Forms are used to make learning more engaging. This approach

makes lessons more interesting and helps students develop digital literacy skills essential in today's technology-driven world.

Differentiated instruction is a key component of the Merdeka Curriculum, which recognizes that each student is unique. Teachers at SMK Farmasi Surabaya use diagnostic assessments to understand their students' learning styles and needs. This information helps them tailor their teaching methods to ensure all students succeed. For instance, students who are kinesthetic learners might be given hands-on projects, while those who are visual learners might use digital tools to create visual presentations.

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes integrating essential materials relevant to students' future careers. At SMK Farmasi Surabaya, the English curriculum includes topics directly related to pharmacy. This includes learning how to describe pharmaceutical products and procedures in English. Through focusing on relevant content, the curriculum ensures that students are well-prepared for their future roles in the pharmaceutical field.

One unique aspect of the Merdeka Curriculum is its emphasis on interdisciplinary learning. At SMK Farmasi Surabaya, English lessons are often integrated with other subjects, such as Indonesian language and cultural studies. This interdisciplinary approach makes learning more holistic and helps students see the connections between different fields of knowledge. For example, a project might involve students working on a presentation that requires them to use their English language skills to describe a pharmacy-related process, incorporating knowledge from their English and pharmacy classes.

Assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum goes beyond traditional exams. At SMK Farmasi Surabaya, various assessment methods are used to evaluate students' understanding and skills. This includes formative assessments like quizzes and class discussions and summative assessments like projects and presentations. This comprehensive approach to assessment ensures that students are learning the material and developing the skills they need to apply their knowledge in real-world situations.

Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is not without its challenges. Teachers must be well-trained and adaptable, and students must be motivated to participate actively in their learning. At SMK Farmasi, teachers address these challenges by participating in ongoing professional development and creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. They also work closely with students to help them understand the importance of active participation and to develop the skills they need to succeed.

The Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant shift in Indonesian education, emphasizing student-centered learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and real-world applications of knowledge. At SMK Farmasi, implementing this curriculum in the English subject has made learning more engaging, relevant, and effective. Focusing on the needs and interests of students, using technology to enhance learning, and integrating essential materials related to pharmacy, the Merdeka Curriculum prepares students not just for exams but for their future careers and lives. This comprehensive approach ensures that students at SMK Farmasi are well-equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to succeed in the ever-evolving world of pharmacy.

The Merdeka Curriculum is a new approach to education in Indonesia that aims to promote critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students (**Irawati, Najili, Supiana, & Zaqiah, 2022**). Some of the key innovations of this curriculum include:

1. Emphasizing student-centered learning: The Merdeka Curriculum places students at the center of the learning process, focusing on their strengths and interests. This approach encourages students to take ownership of their learning and develop a deeper understanding of the material.
2. Integrating local culture and values: The curriculum incorporates local culture and values into the learning process, encouraging students to develop a sense of pride in their heritage and a deeper understanding of their community.
3. Fostering creativity and innovation: The Merdeka Curriculum encourages students to think outside the box and develop creative solutions to problems. This approach helps students develop the necessary skills to succeed in an ever-changing world.
4. Providing real-world experiences: The curriculum emphasizes hands-on learning and allows students to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. This approach helps students develop practical skills to use in their future careers.

The learner-centered approach to teaching English in the Merdeka Curriculum is a key component of the curriculum's overall philosophy. The curriculum places the student at the center of the learning process, meaning the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than an authority figure. This approach encourages students to take ownership of their learning and to develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. By focusing on individual student needs and interests, the curriculum helps students become lifelong learners who are confident, creative, and capable of adapting to the world's changing demands.

Emphasizing Student-Centered Learning

Emphasizing student-centered learning means placing the student at the center of the learning process. This approach focuses on students' individual strengths and interests, encouraging them to take ownership of their learning and develop a deeper understanding of the material. Teachers act as facilitators, guiding students toward their learning goals and providing support when needed (Irawati et al., 2022). The aim is to encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students, which can help them become lifelong learners who are confident and capable of adapting to the changing demands of the world around them.

The learner-centered approach in education focuses on students' needs, interests, and abilities. It shifts the traditional teacher-led model to one where students actively participate in their learning process. This approach is particularly effective in specialized vocational settings, such as the SMK Farmasi Surabaya, where students must acquire specific skills and knowledge relevant to their future careers. Teacher engage students in activities that require them to actively participate and take responsibility for their learning. Engaging activities and real-world applications keep students interested and invested in their learning. Encouraging students to work together, share ideas, and

solve problems collectively and tailoring instruction to meet each student's individual needs and learning styles.

Students are more motivated to learn when they see the direct relevance of English to their future careers. Students develop both language skills and critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills essential for their future professions. Role-playing and simulations help students practice and improve their professional communication skills. Regular use of English in relevant contexts builds students' confidence in their language abilities. Collaborative and interactive activities create a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. Emphasizing student-centered learning in English subjects at SMK Farmasi Surabaya aligns with the principles of the learner-centered approach by making education relevant, engaging, and tailored to the needs of students. Through active, collaborative, personalized, and contextual learning strategies, students improve their English proficiency and develop essential skills for their future careers in the pharmaceutical field.

Integrating local culture and values

In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, integrating local culture and values is a key component of the learner-centered approach. This integration aims to make learning more relevant and meaningful for students by connecting educational content with their cultural background and community values (Irawati et al., 2022). Using incorporating local cultural elements into the curriculum, teachers can foster a deeper connection between students and their learning material, enhancing engagement and promoting a sense of identity and belonging. The learner-centered approach under the Merdeka Curriculum involves various strategies to embed local culture and values, such as contextual learning; lessons are designed around real-life contexts familiar to students, making the learning process more relatable and practical. Project-based learning is also introduced to make students engage in projects that reflect local cultural practices, traditions, and societal issues, allowing them to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways (Zelvia Damayanti, English teacher, SMK Farmasi Surabaya, in discussion with the researcher, Surabaya, November 2024). Collaborative learning makes activities encourage students to work together, share cultural insights, and learn from each other's experiences, promoting cultural appreciation and understanding.

## Fostering Creativity and Innovation

The Merdeka Curriculum, proposed by Irawati, emphasizes fostering creativity and innovation through several key aspects; integrating various disciplines and perspectives to encourage a comprehensive understanding of subjects. Emphasizing hands-on experiences and practical applications to deepen learning and promote innovation. Students are encouraged to question, analyze, and evaluate information independently to foster innovative solutions by promoting teamwork and communication skills to facilitate idea-sharing and collective problem-solving. Allowing for flexibility in learning approaches and encouraging adaptation to changing circumstances to nurture creativity. These aspects aim to create an educational environment that

imparts knowledge and cultivates the skills necessary for students to become creative thinkers and innovators.

At SMK Farmasi Surabaya, fostering creativity and innovation is taught through project-based learning. For instance, an assignment on a narrative task, the story of Timun Mas.
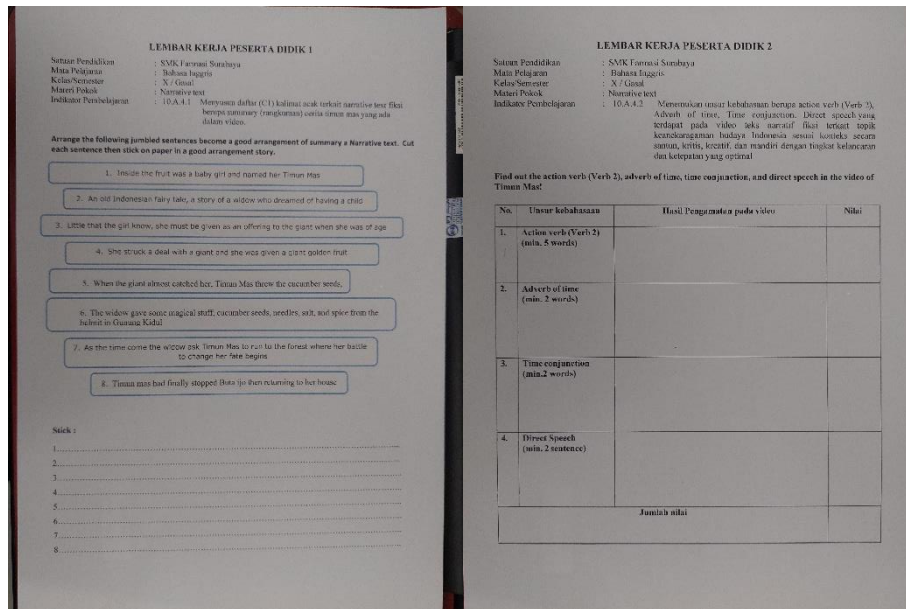
Figures 1. Students' worksheets

From the worksheets, the students are required some assignments which consist of a jumbled sentence that needs to be arranged to become a good summary of "Timun Mas". The worksheets also include finding out the action verb, adverb of time, time conjunction, and direct speech from the story. The students did the assignment with the creativity that taught the art subjects (Seni Kebudayaan Keterampilan) into project-based learning.
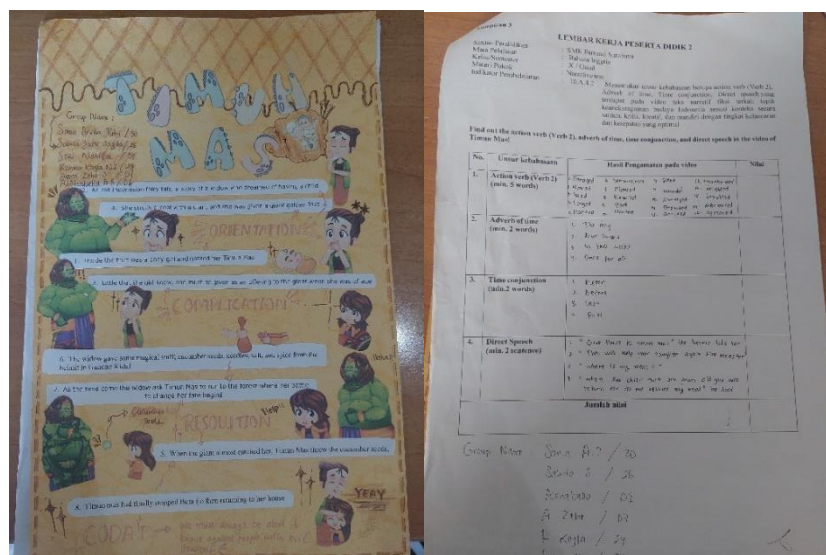
Figures 2. Students' assignment result

From the results shown, the students did the assignments; a jumbled sentence that needs to be arranged to become a good summary of "Timun Mas" and the activity of finding out the action verb, adverb of time, time conjunction, and direct speech from the story. The assignment was done exquisitely with ornaments and decorations unavailable in the worksheets. At this point the Merdeka Curriculum changes English lessons to frequently collaborate with other subjects like art (Seni Budaya Keterampilan), showcasing the Merdeka Curriculum's unique focus on interdisciplinary learning. This approach not only enhances the comprehensiveness of education but also illustrates to students the interconnectedness of various fields of study.

Providing Real-World Experiences

In the Merdeka Curriculum by Irawati (2022), providing real-world experiences is emphasized to enhance learning and prepare students for practical challenges. This approach involves:

1. Experiential Learning: Encouraging students to engage directly with real-world scenarios, tasks, and problems relevant to their fields of study.
2. Internships and Apprenticeships: Facilitating opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience through internships or apprenticeships in various industries or professions.
3. Industry Partnerships: Collaborating with businesses, organizations, and professionals to expose students to real-world practices and trends in their respective fields.
4. Project-Based Learning: This involves structuring learning around projects that require students to apply their knowledge and skills to solve authentic problems, mimicking real-world challenges.
5. Field Trips and Simulations: Organizing workplace visits, field trips, or simulations that simulate real-world environments, providing practical insights and experiences.

By integrating these elements, the Merdeka Curriculum aims to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, preparing students more effectively for future careers and challenges. SMK Farmasi Surabaya already provided these elements before the Merdeka Curriculum was applied for the students.

For English subjects, the SMK Farmasi Surabaya taught the material related to the pharmaceutical subjects are the main material at the school. As stated by Musyahda, (2019)In teaching material by Musyahda (2019), local wisdom refers to incorporating indigenous knowledge, values, traditions, and practices specific to the local community or culture into educational content and curriculum. In education, integrating local wisdom into teaching materials means including cultural narratives, traditions, and practices unique to the local context. This approach helps students connect their learning to their immediate environment and heritage, fostering a sense of pride and identity. Musyahda (2019) emphasizes the cultural context in student writing and reflects the importance of incorporating local wisdom. By pairing sentences with identity contexts, students learn language skills and deepen their understanding of their cultural background. This method supports High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) by encouraging analysis, synthesis, and evaluation within a familiar cultural framework. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to be student-centered, placing the individual learner's strengths, interests, and needs at the core of the educational process. It

promotes autonomy and ownership of learning, encouraging students to engage deeply with the material.

When teaching materials are infused with local wisdom, they become more relatable and engaging for students. This relevance can inspire a deeper interest in the subject matter. The Merdeka Curriculum's focus on individual strengths and interests aligns well with using culturally relevant materials, as students are more likely to connect with and take ownership of their learning when it reflects their cultural identity. Students will likely be more engaged and motivated when they see their identity represented in their learning materials. This engagement can lead to more active participation in the learning process.

Exploring the relation between the students' identity contexts encourages students to think critically about their heritage and how it relates to broader concepts. This exploration can lead to innovative thinking and creative problem-solving. Teaching materials that reflect local wisdom help students develop a sense of identity in their cultural heritage. This connection to their roots can strengthen their cultural identity.

Using local wisdom ensures that these experiences are relevant and meaningful, helping students apply their learning in practical contexts. Integrating local wisdom into teaching materials supports the learner-centered approach of the Merdeka Curriculum by making learning more relevant, engaging, and meaningful for students. It aligns with the curriculum's goals of fostering critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills while nurturing students' cultural identity and pride. This synergy creates a holistic and enriching educational experience that prepares students for the future while staying connected to their cultural roots. By incorporating local wisdom, teaching materials can provide students with practical knowledge and skills directly applicable to their community and everyday life.

For instance, SMK Farmasi Surabaya emphasizes and preserves its pharmaceutical subjects as heritage and identity within the educational framework to promote students' identity. This means making learning materials more relevant and meaningful to students by connecting them with their local context and experiences as pharmaceutical students. On the learning subjects, description text: Students are encouraged to do some activities such as observing and describing things in a laboratory.
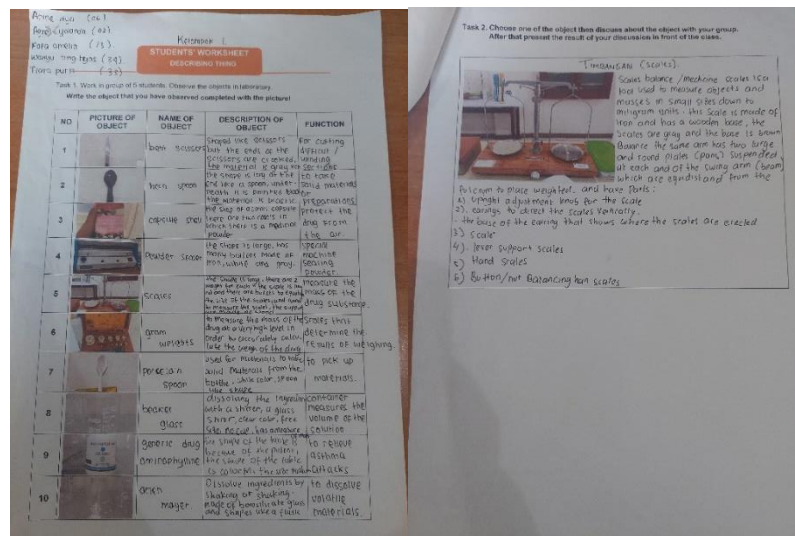
Figure 3. Students' project-based learning in the laboratory

From the project, students can utilize their traditional knowledge and practices on pharmaceuticals that promote sustainable development in another language, from Bahasa Indonesia to English. Integrating local wisdom into teaching materials can enrich the learning experience, empower students to value their subjects' heritage, and contribute positively to their knowledge.

Another example of the subjects between English and pharmaceutical subjects at SMK Farmasi Surabaya is the role-playing exercise. In SMK Farmasi Surabaya, as part of the Merdeka Curriculum's approach to interdisciplinary learning, role-playing exercises between patients and pharmacists in English subjects serve several purposes, for instance as language proficiency study to help students practice and improve their English language skills, particularly in communication and vocabulary related to pharmacy and healthcare. By simulating interactions between patients and pharmacists, these exercises provide students with a practical understanding of how English is used in professional contexts. The students integrate knowledge from both English language learning and pharmacy studies, showing students the practical application of language skills in their chosen field. Role-playing develops essential soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and effective communication, which are crucial in healthcare professions. Engaging in role-plays helps students understand cultural aspects of patient interaction and healthcare practices, preparing them for diverse professional environments. these role-playing exercises not only enhance language proficiency but also prepare students for real-world scenarios in pharmacy settings, aligning with the holistic and practical approach of the Merdeka Curriculum (Zelvia Damayanti, English teacher, SMK Farmasi Surabaya, in discussion with the researcher, Surabaya, November 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the contrasting portrayals of gender roles in Indonesian and Korean Pocari Sweat advertisements, reflecting broader cultural contexts. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, it is evident that Indonesian advertisements reinforce patriarchal values, positioning women in supportive roles, while Korean advertisements promote feminist ideals, showcasing

women as independent and capable individuals. These findings underscore the influential role of advertising in shaping and perpetuating societal norms about gender.

The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender representation in media by demonstrating how advertisements act as cultural artifacts that either challenge or reinforce traditional stereotypes. Understanding these portrayals is crucial in fostering media literacy and encouraging more equitable representations of gender in advertising.

In the context of education, particularly in Indonesia, the findings of this study align with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes critical thinking, social awareness, and cultural appreciation. Given that media plays a crucial role in shaping students' perspectives, integrating media literacy education into the curriculum can help students critically analyze advertisements and other forms of media. By equipping students with analytical skills, education policymakers can foster a generation that is more conscious of gender biases and media influence.

This study suggests that gender representation in media can be incorporated into language learning and social studies curricula for teachers. Using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) approaches, educators can design lessons encouraging students to analyze advertisements, discuss gender stereotypes, and explore cultural representations. Teachers should also facilitate classroom discussions that promote gender equality, critical thinking, and media awareness.

For students, this study emphasizes the importance of developing media literacy skills to critically engage with advertisements and other media forms. Encouraging students to compare gender portrayals across cultures can foster intercultural understanding and broaden their perspectives on gender roles. Additionally, integrating interactive learning activities, such as analyzing advertisements or creating their own media content, can enhance students' analytical and creative skills.

While this study provides valuable insights, it has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses only on visual elements and does not account for audience reception. Future studies could explore how different audiences, including diverse age groups and social backgrounds, interpret these advertisements. Second, this study examines only two advertisements from 2018. Expanding the research to include multiple brands, different time periods, and various media platforms (e.g., television, social media) would provide a more comprehensive view of evolving gender portrayals. Lastly, conducting cross-national comparative studies across more Asian countries could offer deeper insights into regional advertising trends and gender representation.

By addressing these limitations, future research can enhance our understanding of how advertising influences gender perceptions, informs cultural identity, and contributes to broader discussions on media representation, gender equality, and education. Such studies will not only support academic discourse but also provide practical insights for advertisers, educators, and policymakers seeking to create more inclusive and equitable representations of gender in media.

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